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First steps

Aspasia E. Paltoglou

What three words would you use to describe the experience of your first qualitative project?

Freedom, relatedness, flexibility. At this point in time, I need to have the freedom and flexibility to investigate a question that I am interested in, at my own pace, learning a new approach as I go along.

**What was your research project about?
What level of study did it contribute to?**

My first qualitative project looks at experiences and motivations in relation to long-distance cycle touring.

Why did you decide to use qualitative methods?

Because qualitative methods are great for in-depth investigation of people's experiences. But there are also reasons in terms of my intellectual and professional development that attracted me to qualitative methods.

How did you choose which method to use?

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is ideal for investigating the embodied experience of cycle touring. For my data collection I mainly used face-to-face interviews, because they are easy for the novice. Because of the exploratory nature of my study, I was also able to incorporate other sources of data, such as participants' photos, or blogs. I love the fact that unexpected sources of information have come up and I can incorporate them into my study.

What was your biggest challenge conducting your research?

Initially, it was finding participants. At the moment, the biggest challenge is time. As a university lecturer, I am so busy with teaching and other research projects, that it is very easy to drop the cycling project.

This is rather ironic, given I started it because I wanted a project that was 100 per cent mine; that I could work on it whenever I wanted to,

and not face any barriers due to equipment, software, experimental cubicles, or the packed schedules of my collaborators.

I will soon present my results at a conference, so that will help me prioritise it.

What did you enjoy about using qualitative methods?

I very much enjoyed conducting the interviews. But I particularly enjoyed chatting with participants after the interview has finished. Such chats did not happen as much when I used to test participants on psychophysiological and cognitive experiments.

Did the experience change your perception of qualitative psychology? How?

My perception of qualitative psychology has been changing for several years now. My PhD was in cognitive neuroscience. After many years of working in the field, I felt a little stuck for new ideas and constrained by the technical challenges. One of my interests is what makes us creative? Physical exercise such as cycling can influence creativity. I thought I should explore this process with methods that give me more creative freedom and will be helpful for doing quantitative studies. The other factor that made me change my mind, was that I started working with some colleagues, such as Emma Davies at Oxford Brookes, or my colleagues at in the department of psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, which has a very strong qualitative methods group. My dissertation students' enthusiasm for qualitative methods also were an incredible inspiration.

What advice would you give to someone about to start their first qualitative research project?

If I could go back in time, I would advise me younger self to be less opposed to qualitative research. Both qualitative and quantitative research have their place and their value, depending on the research question. Additionally, thinking in terms of qualitative questions, means that you can approach a subject with a more open mind, in a more holistic and less restrictive way compared to thinking in terms of a quantitative study, which usually involves having to think of confounding variables and limitations of your study.

I feel we need every method we can get to study such a complex thing as human behaviour.

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